

jai Chowdhry comes from a patriotic family where art and music were an integral part of life. Before India's partition in 1947, Ajai's father worked as a flourishing criminal lawyer in what is now known as Pakistan. As a president of the Congress at the then Abbottabad, he was deeply involved in the Indian freedom movement and came in touch with Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, who was commonly known as Frontier Gandhi.

Ajai's parents shifted from Abbottabad in Pakistan to India along with their six children after the partition. "They came to India in difficult circumstances with nothing in hand, only the children on a train, which was pretty much the last train out of Pakistan. I was told that my parents got separated from my siblings into different bogevs and they had no idea what was happening to their children. On the way, my grandmother died. Finally, they landed in Delhi and started living in an old dirty house that belonged to a Muslim family that had left India. After a while, they moved to a refugee camp," Ajai tells while narrating the post-partition crisis faced by his family.

Immediately after shifting to India, Ajai's father got a job related to integration of the princely states after Independence and shifted to Mount Abu in Rajasthan. Ajai recalls, "My family moved to a fantastic place on the bank of beautiful Nakki Lake and their life changed. They all settled down in Mount Abu and I was born there in 1950. I have never been to Mount Abu since then; I've just been hearing beautiful stories about how fantastic that home was. Someday, I shall visit that home. It's on my bucket list."

Remembering the early years

In 1955, Ajai's father joined the administrative service as an IAS

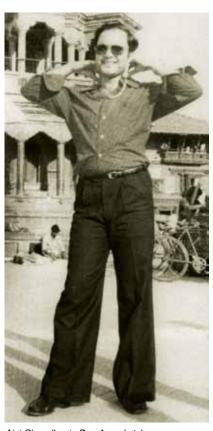
"I grew up in a very different family environment. My parents were fond of art and music. My father, Jai Krishna Chowdhry Habeeb, was a reasonably known Urdu poet. My sister used to put the ghazals that he wrote to tune. We would have mushairas at home. I was introduced to classical music at a young age during our stay in Rewa. That place was near Maihar. Therefore, my father used to take us to visit Maihar Gharana and listen to music at each possible opportunity. I also got the opportunity to listen to the famous sarod maestro Allauddin Khan's music. Because of my upbringing in such a musical environment, I also got fond of music. I tried my hand at tabla, but it just didn't work out. Then I learned something interesting. I learned how to play tabla by mouth. I remember doing performances on stage with my sister. She would sing and I would play tabla with my mouth." — Ajai Chowdhry

officer. He says, "It took the entire family on a different journey as my father chose a state called Vindhya Pradesh for his first posting. Later, that place was merged with Madhya Bharat and Bhopal to form Madhya Pradesh. As an IAS officer, my father had to move from one place to another in Vindhya Pradesh. Most of those small places were underdeveloped. The first posting was to a small place called Shahdol that did not even have tap water."

From Shahdol, Ajai's family moved to Nowgong. Life was better there as the family started staying in a huge British-era residence with a beautiful orchard. The house had a swimming pool and tennis court. Ajai started learning those sports there only. However, shortly thereafter, his father was posted to Rewa near Allahabad. Ajai began his schooling there in a Hindi-medium school run by the queen of Rewa, Praveen Kumari.

Ajai's life was quite eventful at Rewa. He used to visit the maharaja's palace to see his pet, Mohan, a white tiger. The maharaja also had a collection of fancy cars. Ajai was quite fascinated by them. He still remembers that the bonnet of a car was adorned with cut diamonds.

While remembering his unique childhood experiences, Ajai tells the story of his pet, which was a tiger cub. "We used to play with the cub and sometimes got scratched. But he didn't last long, because those days there was the concept of spraying DDT, which was very dangerous for animals as they used to lick it



Ajai Chowdhry in Dev Anand style

unknowingly and die. Exactly the same happened to that poor fellow. I was so upset that my father got it stuffed and gave it to me as a gift to keep it in my room."

Ajai developed a fondness for pets since then. Later, he got an Alsatian as a pet. To date, Ajai keeps pet dogs at home.

After staying a few years in Rewa, his father retired and the family shifted to Jabalpur. He was admitted to the Christ Church School. Jabalpur, for his formal education.

School days were a golden time



Ajai Chowdhry receiving Padma Bhushan award from former President, Pratibha D. Patil

for Ajai, as he recalls, "I had a great time in school. I was never a great student but I was fond of doing many things. I used to play table tennis till late evening and I became very good at it. I was number two among the junior table tennis players in the state." He was also an avid reader and a movie buff.

Ajai took an active part in NCC, which was compulsory in his school those days. He had to go out of the city for NCC activities, which he enjoyed a lot. "I made some very good friends, one of whom, Sharat Saxena, has remained a friend since then. He was my classmate," he explains.

Ajai remembers being taught by a very sharp mathematics teacher, called Guruji, who used to catch hold of Ajai when he couldn't perform. Ajai also mentions an amazing English teacher, Mr Shinde. He used to teach the language in an

interesting way using theatrical and storytelling techniques. His teaching helped Ajai to get a command over the language.

Ajai completed his schooling in 1966. After that, he attended Jabalpur Engineering College and received a Bachelor of Engineering (Electronics and Telecom) degree in 1971. Later, he did an Executive Program at Michigan where the famous Dr C.K. Prahlad taught him.

Shaping life with great experiences

Fortunately, Ajai was surrounded by family members and friends who helped him to inculcate nice hobbies and interests. For example, Ajai was influenced a lot

by his elder brother, who encouraged him to read different kinds of books. Ajai started with Enid Blyton and went on to Zane Grey, Max Brand, and a whole bunch of western books. Gradually, it became his absolute passion, which continues to date. Aiai's amazing collection of books is quite enviable.

Ajai remembers going on jungle safaris during his school and college days. He remembers his amazing travel experiences around Jabalpur, such as the elephant safari at Kanha, visiting Marble Rocks on a full moon night, and the boat ride in Narmada near Marble Rocks. Thus, Ajai developed his love for nature and wildlife.

Wildlife photography is also one of his interests. His friend Rajnikanth Yadav helped him a lot to hone his photographic skills. Ajai also posed as a model for Rajnikanth's photography. One of the pictures was published in The Illustrated Weekly of India magazine.

Ajai mentions, "I made friends with one of my neighbours, Chintan Sagreiya, who was a good student. I had another friend, Ashok, who was also a brilliant student. I used to learn a lot from both Ashok and Chintan. Ashok and I got along very well because we both had a strong interest in space science. In those days, my room was full of pictures of space. I used to write to NASA and NASA would very kindly respond and send me huge posters and pictures."

Ajai reminisces about the day when Armstrong landed on the moon. In those days, television was not yet introduced in India. "The only thing that you had was a basic radio, which you would use somehow to tune to the frequency to get the broadcast from America. Both Ashok and I tuned our radios and listened to the broadcast when Armstrong landed on the moon. My fascination with space has continued since then," he explains.

Ajai nurtured another great hobby during his college days. He made pen friends around the world. In this preemail era, his pen-friendship continued with the help of handwritten snail letters. It also helped him to nurture his stamp-collection hobbies. He remembers, "I used to write to my pen friends in the US, France, Germany, Philippines, etc, and used to collect beautiful stamps from their reply to letters. I think, those days, people in these countries had no idea where India was. So, they wanted to know more about India. We always used to wait for letters from our pen friends. And the postman was the most welcome guy to see at home, because he would bring these letters for us."

This hobby also came into work for Ajai and his friends in some unique ways. For example, as they grew up, they started shaving but the quality of blades available in the country was poor. So, they figured



Ajai Chowdhry with Prime Minister Narendra Modi

out a way. They used to request their pen friends abroad to stick a blade in every reply letter. Thus, they would have a fantastic Schick or Gillette blade with every letter.

Ajai's passion for sports continued during his college days. He mentions, "From table tennis I graduated to learning tennis, because my father was a tennis player. I also learned how to play badminton. I was always a racket player. Later, when I went to Singapore, I learned squash."

Ajai shared another interesting hobby with his college friend Suresh Sundaram. They were shortwave listeners (SWLs). They used to locate shortwave locations of many countries through their radios. It was like finding the frequencies of those radio stations and tuning the radio accordingly. Ajai also recalls spending hours with friends after college in his garden and listening to music together. Music remains an important part of his life.

Cinema was another strong common bond between Ajai and his friends. He recalls, "We all used to go off to watch movies' night shows without informing our parents. We used to watch both Hindi and English movies, sitting next to the screen as it was difficult to afford costly back-row tickets. We used to look up to the great actor Dev Anand and I was very fond of him. We watched all his movies. I still remember my excitement after seeing the full-page advertisement for his great movie Guide in a newspaper named Screen. It was 1966 and I was in the final grade of my school. I used to keep waiting for the release of his movies to watch on the first day." His passion for

Dev Anand's movies continues as he did not miss even the last movie of that great actor.

Beginning of the professional life

Soon after completing his engineering degree in 1971, Ajai began his professional journey. He broke the then stereotype of 'getting into an engineering job in a government department.' While describing the same, he mentions," My parents were always interested in all of their children getting into civil service, but none of us got into IAS." Ajai's elder brother joined an oil company. His suggestions influenced Ajai to

develop an interest in sales and marketing. Thus, he decided to take a job in sales and marketing engineering products.

Ajai began his career with Delhi Cloth & General Mills (DCM) Data Products as a sales trainee in the electronics product division of the company with a salary of ₹600 per month. After training, Ajai was posted in Mumbai for selling industrialgrade calculators. Ajai describes, "The office was in Churchgate area. It was on the mezzanine floor of a textiles shop. We had a little cubby hole-type office upstairs, where only five-six people could sit."

In Mumbai, Ajai shared a rented apartment in Ghatkopar with his manager Yogesh Vaidya. He recalls, "Oh, what a terrible place it was! The windowpanes were all broken. There was bird-shit all over the place. The only consolation was that there was a Udupi restaurant below. So, at least we had the option of breakfast. Soon we moved to an apartment near Juhu. Yogesh was married, so he got the bigger room and I got the little one. It was a nice arrangement because his wife was a good cook. I used to get home-cooked food. We commuted from Ghatkopar to Churchgate by bus or train."

While working at DCM, Ajai learned unique selling techniques from Yogesh and successfully handled many deals with clients like engineers in the state irrigation departments, chemists in the cooperative-run sugar factories in the rural areas of Maharashtra, etc. While describing his struggle in those early days, Ajai mentions that after completing the deals he used to befriend truck drivers to get back

"We all came to Delhi to attend a DCM conference. After that, we were invited by Shiv Nadar to his home. He told us that he was going to start a new business with Arjun Malhotra. He asked interested people to join his business. Initially, ten to twelve people were interested and I was one of them. However, after assessing the risk, only four dedicated people, including me, joined them. I was too young then, so I had nothing to lose. We decided to start our own computer business with the name Hindustan Computers Limited (HCL)."

to Mumbai by trucks carrying sugarcane. He was also able to sell into many agricultural universities.

Being a passionate entrepreneur

After spending three years at DCM, Ajai began his entrepreneurial journey with his HCL business partners, who included Shiv Nadar, Arjun Malhotra, Pammi Puri, Subhash Arora, and Yogesh Vaidya.

Initially, they started a company named Microcomp. However, they had neither enough funds nor the mandatory license (essential at that time) to start a computer business. Ajai recalls, "We started picking up calculators from a company called TeleVista and marketed those products to gather some cash for the license fee. We kept waiting to see how we would get the license, because those days startups were not given licenses. Fortunately, we found that Uttar Pradesh (UP) government was sitting with a license. Therefore, we collaborated with the UP Electronics Corporation and formed Hindustan Computers Limited (HCL) in 1976."

In HCL, Ajai started his work in Mumbai along with Yogesh Vaidya. Later, he took over the business in South India. He had an interesting journey as the youngest founder



Ajai Chowdhry singing at a concert



Ajai Chowdhry with family

member of HCL. He recalls, "It was difficult to run a new company like HCL as opposed to an established one like DCM. However, I made some good breakthroughs in Coimbatore. The first product was a scientific engineering computer called the Micro-2200. Initially, I had to sell the product just with a brochure as the product was under development. I used to meet professors in

> IITs and reputed engineering institutes and request them to promote us-a bunch of young engineers. Once, I carried the products and delivered them to the professors in IIT Madras to avoid delay because the product got ready only two days before the year-end delivery deadline." Ajai is still in touch with his first set of customers.

In 1979, HCL management decided to venture into the international market. Ajai went to Singapore for that mission. He took HCL to Singapore in 1980 and created a business

spanning ASEAN, China, and Hong Kong. In 1995, he took over the reins of HCL Infosystems and created a US\$1.6 billion organisation over the next 15 years. HCL Infosystems became the leader in hardware products, system integration, and Nokia phone distribution.

Ajai describes his journey in the international market as a great learning experience. Be it gaining knowledge about new technology from experts in the US, or identifying knowledge partners from Oxford University, or handling crude negotiation practices in the China market, he left no stone unturned to achieve success. in the international market.

After establishing HCL in the international market, Ajai returned to India and continued his effort to promote HCL with the help of new technologies and new strategies. From introducing India's first home PC to developing the country's most impressive mobile distribution strategy in 1996, the company achieved many milestones under his guidance.

Facilitating the Indian electronics industry

Ajai has been at the forefront in helping create the electronics industry in India. He has been involved in government committees since 1999. In 2009, he headed a task force created by MeitY (the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology), which made path-breaking recommendations where the task force warned that the electronics import bill will exceed the oil import bill. This formed the basis of the Electronics Policy.

In 2011, in recognition of helping build the IT and electronics industry in India, the Hon'ble President of India conferred him the prestigious Padma Bhushan award, one of the highest civilian honours in India. He has received many awards, including EFY's Electronics Man of the Year 2010, CNBC's India Innovation of the Year Award 2010, and Cybermedia Business ICT Award 2013 for Lifetime Achievement in ICT.

Ajai has been an institution builder and has chaired IIT Hyderabad and IIIT-Naya Raipur and helped build these two institutions from their founding. And then, he chaired IIT Patna during its early days. In addition, he was Chairman of NIFFT Ranchi and helped convert the institute to the National Institute of Advanced Manufacturing with the change of course towards Industry 4.0. Aiai was also the Founding Chairman of the Electronics Sector Skills Council of India.

Since 2011, Ajai has been deeply

"I always believed in giving back to society, so I have set up a charitable trust. called Swayam, where we contribute to many areas, including education, women empowerment, poverty alleviation, and provided relief during Covid to Delhi and Goa citizens. I am also a Board Member of Population Foundation of India, a Trustee of Save Life Foundation, and Founding Angel of Nudge Foundation." — Ajai Chowdhry

Some of My Favourite Things

Favourite actor: Dev Anand Favourite actress: Sadhna

Favourite music: Music is my passion. I love singing and old Bollywood music

Favourite food: Chinese food Favourite film: Guide

Favourite pastimes: Reading books, singing, and watching movies

Favourite book: I read all kinds of books, both fiction and non-fiction. At present, I am reading

a great book called The Great Tech Game.

involved in investing in, nurturing, and mentoring startups. He is on the board of the largest angel network in India, Indian Angel Network, and has personally invested in more than 70 startups. He is on the Investment Committee of the IAN Fund, Electronic Development Fund, and Canbank Venture Capital Fund. He is also the Chairman of the FICCI Startup Committee.

Ajai has been nominated by MeitY as a Member of the Advisory Board of India Semiconductor Mission. He has been appointed as an Esteemed Member of the Consultation Group on Science & Technology and Innovation Sector by the Vice-Chairman of Niti Aayog.

In 2021, Ajai co-founded EPIC Foundation, an industry-led nonprofit organisation conceived to develop electronics products of national importance. It aims to unleash an economic potential of 20 billion dollars and self-empower the masses of India by bridging the digital divide and creating a secure technology infrastructure. He is currently the Chairman of EPIC Foundation and has created a fabulous team of more than 50 eminent global advisors to provide impetus to this important national initiative.

Nurturing life with family and music

Ajai began his family life simultaneously with his journey at HCL. He got married in 1977 after meeting his wife, Kunkun Chowdhry, for the first time at Shiv Nadar's house.

She is a cousin of Shiv Nadar's wife. Guddu.

Ajai and Kunkun have two sons, Kunal and Akshay. Their elder son, Kunal, is an entrepreneur with strong academic background, and the younger one, Akshay, has chosen music as his career. While sharing a few memorable family moments, Ajai narrates, "My family fantastically celebrated my 70th birthday in Goa. My wife created a beautiful coffee table book on my life. My son and grandchildren conceptualised and performed a musical show for me."

In addition to living a happy family life, Ajai continues nurturing his passion for music. From jazz to old Hindi film songs, and from old western numbers to Indian classical, he has a varied playlist. While his all-time favourite Hindi film singers are the two legends, Kishore Kumar and Mohammad Rafi, he is also quite fond of the jazz idols, George Benson and Earl Klugh.

The marriage contributed more melodies to Ajai's life as his wife Kunkun is the granddaughter of renowned Naina Devi, often regarded as India's Thumri queen. Ajai says, "Some of my taste in classical music also got influenced by my wife." In Hindustani classical music, he is mesmerised by Kishori Amonkar's voice.

Ajai is actively involved in the musical community named Luttf. As a part of the community, he performs regularly and participates in theme-based musical rendezvous every week. EFY

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